DYNAMICS OF VIOLENCE IN THE SELECTED NOVELS OF SOUTH ASIA (1988-2007): A CRITICAL STUDY

A REVISED SYNOPSIS

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This thesis attempts to study the dynamics of violence in the post eighties fiction of South Asia with reference to Tehmina Durrani, Taslima Nasrin, A. Sivanandan, S. Selvadurai and Khaled Hosseini. From time immemorial, humanity has borne the brunt of several crusades, jihad, political annexations, and other fundamentalist activities. Despite the teachings of religious leaders stressing upon tolerance, peace and brotherhood, the world has seen unprecedented violence and there has been no let up in the violent and extremist activities. In the twentieth century, the world witnessed the two World Wars, causing unimaginable destruction and has constantly been under the threat of a nuclear holocaust. All the nations of the world have been a witness to severe devastation and destruction caused by violence in one way or the other-be it the Spanish Civil War, Sri Lankan Civil War, demolition of the Babri Masjid, the Partition trauma, Talibanization of Afghanistan, the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina or the ongoing terrorist attacks world over. Despite undergoing untold misery and sufferings, people have still not learnt a lesson from these violent events. Instead, there has been a tremendous escalation in terrorist and extremist activities the world over in the twenty first century. The term violence implies, "The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, to oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation." [1]

Violence can be of mental or physical nature, inflicted at subjective, interpersonal or collective levels in the social, political, religious or domestic domain. Domestic violence has been a major problem in the society of every nation. Violence against women is defined as "an act of gender based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or sufferings to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary

[1]Krug et al., *World Report on Violence and Health.* World Health Organisation.2002.http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/violence.com/web.

deprivation of liberty of her occurring in public or private life. Some important causes of violence against women are sexual harassment, forced marriage, victims of rape and son's preference."[2]

Violence is not confined to domestic aspect, ethnic violence has also been one of the significant causes of discontent and unrest in most of the nations of the world. The differences between two religious or culturally diverse groups in the country obstruct group unity, intensify interpersonal hostilities and create a negative environment. The need to integrate sociological and psychological aspects in the analysis of cultural conflicts, i.e. conflicts between ethnic and religious groups, has long been felt while its absence has been equally long deplored. Frustration, basically defined as the blocking of goal directed behavior, is one of the major psychological factors that influence aggressive behavior of an individual. Berkowitz revised the frustration-aggresssive theory in 1978, stating that "frustration leads to anger and anger can sometimes lead to aggressive behavior."[3] Several other factors can be attributed to the generation of violence viz. biological, socio-economic or political. The biological factors can influence an individual's behaviour and increase the likelihood of his/her becoming a victim or perpetrator of violence. The brain structure called amygdala in humans has been linked to aggressive behavior. Increased metabolic activity in the right amygdala has been observed to cause impulsive aggression and sometimes blood chemistry and alcohol can also contribute to aggressive behavior by decreasing self awareness and ability to accurately perceive the outcome of an aggressive act.

Besides these, the economic factor may also become a great cause of violence in family, society and country at large. Economic violence includes attacks by larger groups motivated by

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[2]Bishoyi, Deepak. *Dimensions of Gender Problem*. New Delhi: Discovery Publishing House. 2007.74. Print.
[3]Biological and Social Factors of Violence
http://homepages.rpi.edu/~verwyc/oh10.htm/web.

economic gain – such as attacks carried out with a purpose of disrupting economic activity, denying access to essential services, or creating economic division and fragmentation. Unemployment, lack of money and resources and income inequality may also create conflicts which force people to act in a violent manner. Family is a social unit and a person experiencing violence in the family may develop the characteristics of being a perpetrator of violence. The broad societal factors that help to create an atmosphere in which violence is either encouraged or inhibited can be social and cultural norms regarding gender roles or parent-child relationships, class distinctions, lingual differences, differences in religious beliefs, the responsiveness of criminal judicial system and above all, political instability that disturbs the whole structure of the society and government policies.

The consequences of violence have always been destructive. Although violence often entails physical damage, yet the most harmful impact of violence is psychological. Psychological violence is not only confined to an individual, but at the intergroup and international levels, psychological violence is often also woven into systems of oppression and injustice. One of the tangible consequences of violence is displacement. People suffer the trauma of dislocation where they are subjected to social, cultural and psychological travails. As violence between ethnic groups or political factions escalates, members of each group become fearful and suspicious of the other group, and the groups tend to become polarized and socially isolated from each other. In situations where there is great inequity and division along lines of ethnicity, gender, or social class, deep emotional wounds can result from racial epithets, refusal to provide services, or being mistreated through a demeaning attitude which contributes to additional violence.

Since victims of violence have had their views of a secure world shattered, they live in a heightened state of fear and paranoia are at risk of becoming the perpetrators of violence.

Violence across different social levels can erode the fabric of amity and harmony as it induces the spirit of aggressiveness or rebellion against authority. In countries with high levels of violence, economic growth can be slowed down, personal and collective security eroded, and social development impeded. Communities can be caught in poverty traps where pervasive violence and deprivation form a vicious circle that stifles economic growth. When violence ends after affecting a large number of lives, it becomes difficult to arrange for education, economic development, political reconstruction or development of a peaceful environment.

South Asia has always been the international theatre of power game, rivalry and confrontation amongst the states and superpowers as well. The history of South Asia has been full of turmoil and escalating violence and almost every country in South Asia has witnessed volatile events affecting a large number of people. This study basically focuses on the treatment and portrayal of violence in the selected novels of the aforementioned South Asian writers. The writers selected for the thesis belong to the nations which have witnessed extremist, fundamentalist, terrorist activities and ethnic clashes leaving a permanent scar on the psyche of the people of those nations. Tehmina Durrani witnessed the anguish and misery suffered by women in Pakistan; Taslima Nasrin the violent fallout of the demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya, Khaled Hosseini the toppling of monarchy, control of Russians and finally the Talibanization of Afghanistan; Sivanandan and Selvadurai the broader ethnic tensions between the Sinhalese and the Tamils causing the Sri Lankan Civil War. It is but natural for these writers to portray the sufferings and anguish of their people in their literary works.

Tehmina Durrani (1953 –) was born into an educated and influential family and was only 17 when she got married to Anees Khan. She divorced him in 1976 and then married Mustafa Khar. Thirteen years of her marriage with Khar are considered the worst period of her life

resulting in divorce thereby losing the custody of her children as well as economic support. She is the author of *Blasphemy* (1988) and *My Feudal Lord* (1991), her autobiography, which won Italy's Marissa Bellasario Prize.

Blasphemy, her first novel is a searing study of evil,focusing on the distortion of Islam by predatory religious leaders. Heer, married to Pir Sain, witnesses unimaginable atrocities and horrible acts from the first night of her marriage. In Pir's Haveli, unspeakable horrors are perpetrated day and night on her body, and mind in the name of Allah. Heer reveals the true nature of Pir Sain when she calls him, "A son's murderer, a daughter's molester and a parasite nibbling the Holy Book."[4] In the second novel *My Feudal Lord* (1991), Durrani details her marriage with Khar who was known as the 'Lion of Punjab', serving as a right hand to Bhutto (P.M of Pakistan) and portrays the hypocrisy of the elite class and the contradictions that flawed the Muslim people. She depicts the gory details of her marriage delineating vividly the physical and mental torture inflicted on her by her powerful husband. Mustafa strikes a terrible blow to the self esteem of Durrani after divorce by saying, "Tehmina, you are nothing anymore. Once you were Begum Tehmina Mustafa Khar. Now you are just Tehmina Durrani…"[5]Stung by such derogatory words, Durrani "decided to cast a stone at hypocrisy, to write this book and break the traditional silence."[6]

Taslima Nasrin (1962-) is a Bangladeshi doctor, turned author, who has been living in exile since 1994. She works to build support for secular humanism, freedom of thought, equality for women and human rights by publishing, lecturing and campaigning. Early in her literary career, she wrote mainly poetry with female oppression as the theme. She started publishing

[4] Durrani, Tehmina. *Blasphemy*. India: Penguin Books Pvt. Ltd. 1999. 175. Print.
[5] Durrani,Tehmina. *My Feudal Lord*. London: Corgi Books Publication.1994.374. Print.
[6] Ibid.375. Print.

prose in the early 1990's, and had produced three collections of essays and four novels before the publication of her controversial novel *Lajja* in 1994. Her other novels are *Oporpkho* (1992), *Shodh* (1992), *Nimontron* (1993), *Forashi Premik* (2002), and *Shorom* (2009).

The demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya on 6th Dec 1992, by a mob of Hindu fundamentalists, created large scale devastation in various parts of India. The riots that followed claimed a large number of lives. The world condemned the incident, but its fallout was felt most acutely in Bangladesh, where Muslim mobs began to seek out and attack the Hindus. It is against this political background that the novel *Lajja* (1994) is set. The book very accurately portrays the anguish and pain of the Hindus, who were victims of these riots. It describes how difficult it was for them to even step outside their houses, and how the families could not breathe easy if a member of their family actually did venture out on the streets. Unremittingly dark and menacing, the novel exposes the mindless bloodthirstiness of fundamentalism and brilliantly captures the insanity of violence in our time.

Unlike *Lajja*, *Shodh* is a story of revenge, dealing with a young woman Jhumur who is an educated girl and marries the man whom she loves. She breaks the news of her pregnancy to her husband, Haroon hoping to make him happy but to her utter dismay he accuses her of cheating on him as he says, "…it's not possible to become pregnant in six weeks."[7]He forces her to get the child aborted which casts a deep psychological impact on Jhumur, so that she becomes vindictive and decides to avenge herself. She gets intimate with Afzal, a paying guest in her house, and finally gives birth to a son, labelling him as Haroon's son. Haroon's loving of the baby ardently, thinking him to be his own son is highly ironical and serves the novelist's purpose of casting a shattering blow to the hegemonic patriarchal set up where a woman's fidelity is

[7]Nasrin, Taslima.*Shodh*. New Delhi: Shrishti Publishers and Distributers. 2003.73. Print.

constantly under the shadow of suspicion and doubt thereby subjecting her to physical and mental anguish and pain.

Ethnic violence has caused immense loss of life and property in many parts of the world. Shyam Selvadurai (1965-) is a Sri Lankan-Canadian novelist who wrote *Funny Boy* (1994), which won Canada First Novel Award. He was born in Colombo to a Sinhalese mother and a Tamil father, members of diverse ethnic groups, whose conflicts form a major theme in his work. The ethnic riots in 1983 drove the family to immigrate to Canada, when Selvadurai was only nineteen.

The novel *Funny Boy* (1994) is set in Sri Lanka and constructed in the form of six poignant stories about a boy, Arjie, coming to age within a wealthy Tamil family in Colombo. Between the ages of seven and fourteen, Arjie explores his sexual identity and encounters the Sinhala-Tamil tensions leading upto the 1983 riots. When Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* was published in 1994, it was hailed as one of the most powerful renditions of trauma of the prevailing ethnic tensions in contemporary Sri Lanka. Selvadurai brings together the struggles of sexuality, ethnicity and class by portraying the development of the protagonist, Arjie, whose maturation is framed against the backdrop of ethnic politics.

Ambalavaner Sivanandan (1923-) is a Sri Lankan novelist and the Director of the Institute of Race Relations, a London based independent educational charity. He has written several books and pamphlets which have brought him name and fame. His first novel *When Memory Dies* was published in 1997 and won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in the Best First Book category for Europe and South Asia. He left Sri Lanka after the 1958 riots.

When Memory Dies (1997), revolves around three generations of a Sri Lankan family in search of coherence and continuity in a country shattered by colonial occupation and marred by ethnic wars. Saha endeavours to find coherence in a return to traditional values, Rajan is in a quest for modernity that takes him to the mother country, and Vijay is in a fight for socialism that ends in terror. Through the viewpoints of the three generations of a Sri Lankan family (taking the reader from 1920s through the 1980s), Sivanandan explores a culture destroyed first by colonization, then through ethnic clashes. The novel focuses upon the group differences which are largely responsible for ethnic violence in the country destroying its culture and the spirit of harmony between the Tamils and the Sinhalese. The work also supplies a rich historical background to the often underreported news accounts of massacres and upheavals in Sri Lanka destroying the political structure, economy and the social fabric of the nation.

Khaled Hosseini (1965-), a prominent novelist of Afghanistan was a witness to the Talibanization of his nation and the stifling and violent atmosphere generated by the imposition of a brutal theocratic rule providing a base for anti western terrorists. Hosseini wrote three remarkable novels *The Kite Runner* (2004), *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) and *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013) and many short stories. These novels are basically set against the backdrop of the talibanisation of Afghanistan.

The Kite Runner (2004) tells the story of Amir who befriends Hassan, the son of his father's Hazara servant. Hosseini focuses on the terrorist activities of the Taliban regime and the atrocities that are perpetrated on women, children and the members of the Hazara clan. It is a vivid and engaging story that reminds us how long the people of Afghanistan have struggled and are still endeavouring to triumph over the forces of violence. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), is a story of Laila and Mariam who are the prime victims of violence at the hands of Rasheed. It

is primarily a novel that highlights the element of violence deeply entrenched in oppression in a patriarchal society. Hosseini delineates the general drama of untold misery, pain and anguish suffered by the women of Afghanistan during the oppressive rule of the Taliban.

All these novelists, Durrani, Nasrin, Sivanandan, Selvadurai, and Hosseini belong to different genders, professions and nationalities. So, each has expressed the experience regarding violence in his or her own particular historical, socio-political, and cultural context. These novelists take a common line in their novels and deal with the realities of exploitation, oppression, subjugation and discrimination. Probing deep into the psyche of their characters, they graphically delineate the traumatic impact of violence on the lives of the people of their respective nations.

All these novelists contend that political, ethnic and domestic divisions have generated violence. Women and girls have become the prime targets of this violence which includes rape, prostitution, forced marriages, sexual slavery, economic vulnerability and complete societal breakdown. The work of these novelists is part of a larger socio-cultural process and it is enlightening to trace out the historical shifts that have resulted in the delineation of the different dimensions of violence ranging from religious fundamentalism to ethnic to domestic violence. All these writers have attempted to create an awareness and consciousness among people, regarding the destructive impact of violence and this, in itself, is a great contribution to the cause of humanity.

To the best of my knowledge, a similar study on this theme has not been attempted so far and this research will be a significant contribution to the existing domain of knowledge.

Objectives of the study will be:

1. To make an in depth study of the various dimensions of violence and the historical, socio-political background against which these novels are set.
2. To explore the portrayal of violence in the selected novels of these writers.
3. To make a comparative study of the attitude and approach of the novelists in their treatment of violence.
4. To analyze critically the socio-cultural message that the novelists have to offer.

The chapter division has been made in accordance with the publication dates of the novels:

1. Introduction
2. The Soul Seared - Durrani's *Blasphemy* and *My Feudal Lord*.
3. Trauma of Dislocation and Fire of Revenge - Nasrin's *Shodh* and *Lajja*.
4. Ethnic Crisis - Sivanandan's *Funny Boy* and Selvadurai's *When Memory Dies.*
5. Matrix of Violence, Love and Sacrifice - Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns.*
6. Conclusion

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